

24 Hours That Changed the World
Telling Our Story... Holy Communion

It is good to be back after a week away! But, I can't help but feel that I got ripped off a little bit, by taking a vacation the week that the church ended up closing down for two days due to snow! The nice thing in that, though, was with the schools closing, Dianna ended up having two days off as well, so we had a little unexpected time together and we got to do some extra snowshoeing, which was great!

We spent last weekend at a Bed and Breakfast in Clinton, NJ, not far from here, run by some very pleasant people (who are great cooks!) who really get the concept of 'Radical Hospitality!' On Saturday, even though they didn't have nearly the amount of snow that we have (and they're only 1.5 hours north), there was still enough for us to go snowshoeing in Round Valley State Recreation Area.

*** So, we packed a lunch and headed out a trail on Saturday, not expecting to get too far. Snowshoeing is a very tiring sport! Two or three hours is pretty much our limit, especially when it's hilly. But there is something very peaceful about crunching through the snow, *** and it was certainly beautiful out there. You're looking a couple pictures of what we were seeing on the way...

Something kind of weird happened to me on that trail, though. I have to say it was a first (and, when I wrote this on Thursday I wrote that I hoped it was a 'last' as well! But I have an addendum to this.) *** So, last Saturday, Dianna and I were meandering down the trail and I saw a man coming toward us who was 'snowshoe running' – it's quite impressive, let me tell you, to *run* on those things! Hard enough just to walk! He was running down a hill and he had a dog with him on a leash.

Well, trail etiquette says that the slow give way to the faster, so I stepped aside to my right, to let him pass – Dianna was about 20 yards behind me. He veered a little bit to his right as well, but the dog was kind of straining against the leash towards me, in between us. Now, I'm a 'dog person' as you know, and I assumed that this dog was trying to meet me. And I held my hand out for it to sniff... the standard way to greet a strange dog. (So I thought.)

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But instead of sniffing my hand...that dog bit me! Right on the back of the hand! I pulled my hand back and said something like “That wasn’t very nice!” and the man said, “Sorry!” and he kept running. It all happened rather quickly. So when I finally pulled my glove off, and saw the dog’s teeth marks very clearly indented onto my hand, and in fact, saw where one tooth had put a small hole in my glove and had broken the skin on the back of my hand.... well, by that time, the man was long gone.

Of course, Dianna was not too thrilled that I hadn’t stopped him and demanded proof of a rabies vaccination... but I didn’t realize that the dog had drawn blood until it was too late. There was no way we were going to catch him. (I kept thinking that I should go sneak behind a tree and stuff my mouth to overflowing with snow and jump out at her later on... but ‘discretion is the better part of valor’ as they say. So, I didn’t.) Anyway, I thought that the dog looked well cared for (even if it was ill behaved) so I am not likely going to develop any diseases, I’m quite sure.

Well that was my entire story, except for this: on Friday morning I was jogging down Haines Drive in Moorestown, and I saw a couple coming toward me walking a large Rottweiler Mix dog. I came up to them, said, “Good morning”, and veered around them, and the next thing I knew, that dog had jumped up and latched onto my wrist. As you may be able to see, it got me pretty good, and I had to go get a tetanus shot and some antibiotics... but now, I’m wondering, What in the world is going on here that the dogs are after me? I don’t know.

Now let me tell you...there was no point to either of those stories!

BUT... there was a point in telling you *a* story. You see, (now, I could be wrong here, in which case this sermon introduction is about to crash and burn) but it certainly seemed to me that you were actually *interested* in hearing what happened to me out there on the Round Valley Recreation Trail, and on Friday morning. Right? And, I don’t know if this is a cause or an effect of my chosen vocation, but I enjoyed telling that story to you – and let me say, you weren’t the first to hear it, either.

I shared both accounts with a number of people, and they *all* seemed interested.

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And *that's* why I shared it with you. To make this point: we get to know people, and they get to know us in lots of ways – by working together, by serving together, by observing each other in action, general conversation, and more... but I think one of the most important things that we do with each other in community is to share our stories. And when you get deep into this thing that we call 'community'... we find that our stories get more and more significant. They get more personal. They start becoming symbolic. And in our stories we not only *reveal* who we are, but I think, that through stories, sometimes we *discover* who we are as well.

If you were with us last Summer, you might remember that I shared a series of messages called 'Why I Believe', and in the course of that series I challenged our congregation to start getting more serious about the source of our faith – the Bible. I said it seems that many more people talk about the Bible than actually *read* it. So I took my own challenge, and I started into a program of reading 3 chapters of the Bible a day, and 5 on Sundays. I get an email reminder every morning.

I started in the middle, somewhere in the book of Psalms. Finished Revelation in December, and now I'm in the middle of the Book of Deuteronomy. Reading the Bible straight through is not the way I'd recommend for most people to read it – but because I've been doing it this way I've been noticing things that I never noticed before.

Especially in reading Genesis – Deuteronomy this Winter. You can't help but notice how frequently things are repeated in these 5 books (which are also called "The Torah/ The Law"). God will give these instructions – in minute detail – to Moses, who then relays them *verbatim* to the people. And then they follow them, and they write them again as they are *doing* these things (this is what we are doing) – from offering sacrifices, to keeping feast days, to the construction of the Tabernacle. And then they will likely also record what they *did* – which in some instances would be the *forth time* for some of this to be written down.

The name of the Book "Deuteronomy" itself means 'second Law'. But of course, it isn't a second *law*, it is a second telling of the first Law. Most of the book is a restatement of the highlights of what had already been written – sometimes *often* – in Exodus, Leviticus, and

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Numbers. But as I'm reading it, I'm realizing how important these things – these details – must have been to God. There was something in these regulations, something in these procedures that were so painstakingly recorded and followed that God wanted the people to remember. There was something God wanted them to understand about Holiness, and the seriousness of sin, and the necessity of a means for Atonement. So they were told these things over and over.

And the list of Feast Days – once again, these days, and what the people of Israel were instructed to do in them, and *why* they were to do it, and *how* they were to do it, well, this was, apparently, critical to the establishment of the Nation of Israel. Imbedded in the feast days, the holidays, was their story. So they were more than stories – these days were the building blocks of a nation. And of all those days of remembering, no *one day* was more important than the celebration of the feast of the Passover.

Which brings us to today. Today we are beginning our series called “24 Hours That Changed the World”. Each week during the season of Lent we are going to be looking at one event that took place during the last 24 hours of Jesus' life. Many of you are participating in small groups that are going a little deeper into each of these events, which is terrific for this church, and our collective walk with God. (And let me add this: we have formed about 24 groups, but we still have a few open groups – but this is the last week the list will be up. So I'd encourage you to sign up for a group if you haven't done that, or if you are in a group with space in it, invite someone to join you this week. Practice Radical Hospitality. The materials are excellent, btw!)

That 24 hour period that changed the world began in the Upper Room... When Jesus broke the Bread and said, “This is my body” and when he picked up the Cup saying “This is my Blood of the New Covenant... shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins...”, *everything he did, everything he said* that night had a connection to the history of the people in that room. That night was part of the stories of all these men, the 12 Disciples. And in turn, what happened in that room has become part of *our* story...the story that defines and shapes *us*.

When the disciples gathered in that upper room, they came, as many Jewish people still do today, to participate in an evening that was meant to be a time of joy and celebration. This night – the Seder – was when as a community they would retell the story of how God delivered his people

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from slavery in Egypt. It was a story that was open-ended – i.e., it was incomplete, in that it hinted at the coming of the One that God would one day send to set *all* people free. The One who would be the deliverer of God’s people.

When those disciples went into the place that Jesus had arranged in advance for them, they came to participate in a feast that remembered the most important act that God had done for Israel – an event recorded in Exodus 3 – 13. The Israelites had been slaves for over 400 years when God appointed Moses to deliver them.

And you remember the story – (maybe you’ve even seen the movie!) As Pharaoh’s heart is hardened against God’s plan for these people, he refuses to let them go. As a result, God sends a series of plagues on the Egyptians, increasing in their intensity. But Pharaoh is still unmoved until God says to Moses that he was going to perform one last terrible deed in that land; after that, Pharaoh would *have* to let the people go: God would strike down the firstborn in every household, even to the very flocks and cattle throughout the entire land of Egypt.

On that terrible night, the Israelites were to sacrifice a lamb to God. And the blood of a lamb was to be placed on the doorpost of their houses, so when the angel of Death passed through the land, it would ‘pass over’ the homes that were marked in that way - by the blood of a lamb. And then the firstborn in those homes would be spared.

That was exactly what happened to these people – all the way up to Pharaoh’s own palace. Pharaoh finally relented. He ordered the Israelites to leave Egypt. But knowing how fickle he was, the Israelites prepared their escape so quickly that there was no time to leaven their bread dough and allow it to rise; so the bread they took with them was unleavened.

The Passover Seder, then, even to this day, is for Jews a time to retell this formative story; this story that defines who they are as a people. Sharing unleavened bread, bitter herbs and many other rituals, this is a night to tell the story of the birth of the Jewish people.

Take a look at this clip, of Rabbi Ann Katz talking about the significance of the Seder...

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[show DVD clip...]

So when the disciples got together on **this** particular night to celebrate the Seder, to remember their history, they came together joyfully. This is meant to be a happy night – (as you get the impression in that film clip, it still is). It’s a time to remember and retell a story of a great deliverance; it’s a story of a God who kept the promises he made to Abraham, Isaac, and to Moses.

But can you imagine how dramatically the tone, the atmosphere, of the room that night must have changed when Jesus looked over the room, in the company of these men who claimed to be his most devoted followers, men who had given up careers and family and reputation for him, and says, *“One of you will betray me.”*

Adam Hamilton, in the book which many of you are reading, and where the outline of this series comes from, writes this:

“The echoes of Jesus’ prediction and of the acts of betrayal by those closest to him are still discomfiting. In our own age, when church leaders have abused children, embezzled funds and more, we realize that such betrayals are commonplace. Jesus might well have said, “All of you will betray me”; and with that realization, we must look finally at ourselves...”¹

You see, the story of the Upper Room has become *our* story. So as we think of what happened that night around *that* Table at the Last Supper, whenever we come together for Holy Communion, part of our remembering at some point, needs to be a place where we ask ourselves, *“When have I been Judas to Jesus?... when have I betrayed my Lord?”* This is why (even in the two of our four services that are not ‘Liturgical services’ *per se*,) we always include a prayer of confession when we are going to celebrate Communion. Because in re-telling this formative story, this story that defines who we are as a Community in Christ, we need to acknowledge this uncomfortable part: that we are all capable of being Judas. We are sinners.

¹ 24 Hours That Changed the World, Adam Hamilton, Abingdon Press, 2009, p. 22

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But fortunately the story does not end there... our Community is not built simply on the common knowledge that we are all messed up. We *are*. But that's the *context* of our story, not the 'meat' of it. This is Good News, not Bad News!

Even though what came next must have also been very difficult – even impossible – for the disciples to understand. Jesus took a loaf of bread, and he broke it... and he said, “This is my Body, broken for you”. As Rabbi Katz mentioned the four cups of wine at a Seder, representing four promises of God (promises of redemption!) Jesus looked again at those around that table and said, “This is my blood... shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

It was later, after the Crucifixion, after his Resurrection, that the people of God began to understand the full significance of what happened that night. That amazing night when these men gathered to remember an act of redemption that took place long before...in the midst of an ancient ritual in which a lamb was slain year after year to remind the people how the blood of a lamb protected them long before... they came to realize that they were in the midst of God's Lamb, the one whose sacrificial death would be the means of eternal life for all who were covered by it in faith.

Jesus, is the Lamb of God...and the Seder itself was transformed that night. It became a remembrance of another act of redemption – one that defeated death itself for all people.

We talked about this in our small group last Thursday evening, and we came to the realization of how the repetition of this holy meal shapes *us* as God's people. It's not just a one time thing... but in a cumulative way, as we come again and again to this table we are reminded of important things. It's our story: we remember the seriousness of sin to God... we are reminded and encouraged to confess and repent. We are reminded in a way that we can see, and taste, and smell, that God has provided the answer for our deepest needs, and so we are made aware – again and again and again – of the depth of God's amazing love for us. In this meal.

Of all the rituals, all the symbols that are ours in our faith tradition...the most powerful one is the one that we remember today...Holy Communion. It is our story.

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<http://faithvisuals.com/content/midnightoilproductions/communion/communionloop.html>